

BAR GNOME

(Bar·num)

A Novel in Twelve Segments

Produced by Paul Kuniholm

"Every crowd has a silver lining."

— P.T. Barnum

"There's a sucker born every minute."

it, *— attributed to P.T. Barnum (he probably didn't say*
but he would have, and that's the point)

"Bar Gnome."

— title of this book, which sounds like Barnum,
which is the whole joke, which is also not a joke

Segment One: Mud Season

The site was a muddy filled-in pile of dirt on the north side of Magnolia Elementary, where the lower playground used to be. Deciduous canopy. Coniferous soil. Excavated. June 16th, and hot in a way Seattle rarely manages. A varnished hull leaned against the storage shed, and beside it a long tapering rowing scull extended from one end like a tongue.

Consider P.T. Barnum. Consider what it means to build an attraction on a pile of filled-in dirt, to varnish something already beautiful and call it an exhibit, to convince a crowd to pay admission to see what they walked past for free every morning on the way to school. The lower playground was gone. Something was going up in its place. A sign near the chain-link said: COMING SOON. It did not say what.

A white Caddy with out-of-state plates sat at the curb. An Aussie girl in the passenger seat with everything up high and curling, watching the site with the focused attention of someone calculating its value. A well with a patinated drawer pull, somehow charred.

He had been running west through the city trying to catch up with Sam. This was not unusual. Catching up with Sam was a condition of existence rather than an event — a permanent state of almost, of nearly, of the back of her head disappearing around the corner just as you rounded it yourself. Sam was in the old waiting room with short blonde hair, curled tight. He arrived at the Vashon Strawberry Festival lecture twenty minutes after she left and spent the remaining daylight sketching — mostly straight lines, some upside-down — including a series of greater-than symbols he later could not explain, and a died-killed routine squared.

He had known Sam for three years by then. They had met through a mutual friend at a reading, a bad reading, the kind where the work is aggressively unfinished and the wine is aggressively mediocre and the room smells like a decision that should have been made differently. Sam had been standing near the back in a green coat, holding a glass she wasn't drinking from, and she had caught his eye with a look of such precise, calibrated, shared suffering that he had laughed — actually laughed, in the middle of the reading — and the reader had paused and looked up and Sam had already looked away, her face completely innocent, her eyes bright.

That was Sam. That was always Sam. The look and then the innocence. The complicity and then the door closed softly. You were never quite sure, afterward, whether the moment had happened or whether you had needed it enough to manufacture it.

Barnum understood the greater-than symbol instinctively. More than. Bigger than. Better than whatever you just saw. The ceiling was not a ceiling. The ceiling was a tent flap, and above the tent flap was another tent, and above that: sky.

Gleb said he was outrageously late and had those Britannia wide-flare bellbottoms on. They met at the turnstile. The turnstile is always the truest thing in a Barnum story: the moment the crowd is counted, the moment the transaction is made physical, the moment there is no longer any question about who is inside and who is not.

In Mor-Mor's house, in the front room, carefully charring three globs of something. Mor explained her upcoming birthday to Ryan, who was eating a piece of pizza with intense eye contact. The rugby match on the television included, embedded in the scrum, several robotic motorized unicycles. Nobody commented. This was the Barnum condition: the astonishing normalized, the exhibit so thoroughly absorbed into the daily that it ceased to require acknowledgment.

He was riding the wrong way on a bike path when the Cadillac station wagon drifted past with quasi-messianic certainty. They were out of gas. He offered to push. The large family unloaded from the Caddy — stirrup pants, belt loops, the demographic confidence of people who believe, at a foundational level, that things will work out. The car coasted into someone's backyard barbecue. Two friends, one of whom was Gene Kelly, met with a thigh-slapping greeting that personified incredulity.

A pink party bus. A missing employee badge. A blueberry farm concealed from her. She watched a VHS tape while the remote reversed playback and she didn't notice. A huge gathering somewhere offscreen. Every Barnum story ends with a huge gathering just offscreen.

He thought about Sam on the bike ride home. He thought about whether she had actually been at the lecture or whether he had invented her presence there out of the same structural optimism that made him always believe she was just ahead of him, just around the corner, just in the room he had not yet entered.

Paul Kuniholm had suggested the notebook. This was characteristic of Paul: the intervention that did not announce itself as an intervention, the practical suggestion with the long tail, the thing that seemed logistical and turned out to be structural. Keep a record, Paul had said. Not for anyone. Just keep one. He had not said why. He had not needed to. Paul Kuniholm understood, as all good producers understand, that the work precedes the understanding of the work — that you make the thing and the thing tells you what it is, provided you have the discipline to keep making it when you cannot yet see what it is.

The egress, famously, was just the exit. The crowd followed the sign because the sign promised something. The crowd always follows the sign.

Segment Two: The Crowd Instructs You

She congregated near the glass doors, looking out over the crowd. Her pretty friend found you. The crowd, which had been watching from the beginning, told you to leave. Pushed you out onto the veranda. Told you to take your dirty children down the ladder into the street below.

Barnum built his first museum on Broadway and kept it open from sunrise until ten at night. When the crowd grew too large and stopped moving, he put up signs that said: THIS WAY TO THE EGRESS. People followed the signs. By the time they realized egress meant exit, they were outside, blinking in the sunlight, and the only way back in cost another ticket.

Sam had been to the museum. Sam had been to every museum. She had a talent for institutions — for finding her way inside them and making herself at home and then, at the precise moment they began to rely on her presence, disappearing. Hospitals. Halfway houses. Clinics. Treatment programs. She moved through them with the ease of someone who had memorized the layout, which she had, because she had been in all of them before. She knew where the exits were. She had always known.

The first time he drove her to a facility — this was before the worst of it, when things were still recoverable in the way that required only ordinary effort — she had been calm. Methodical. She had a bag packed before he arrived, which told him this was not her first admission and that she had learned, somewhere along the way, to be ready. She kissed him at the door in the way you kiss someone when you want them to remember the kiss and not the circumstances of it. He remembered both.

Leaping from a point high above Pioneer Square. Taking inventory of confections as one floats down. Finding ducks with their tails removed, roped to trees for the purpose of harnessing gravitational energy. Someone hiding on the top floor while extortionists hatched their plan below. A narrow convoy rolling up 35th SW and turning without signaling.

A bus-sized Impala. Light My Fire, minimizing. A high white tower. A basement family name. Flamenco lessons. The felling of massive old-growth. A company security guard in a clown costume turning his leather cap sideways, warning the other viewers about the predictability of what was about to happen — and this is the Barnum irony, the terminal irony: the clown who warns you about the trick is still the clown, the warning is still part of the act, the meta-awareness does not exempt you from participation.

Barnum had a dwarf named Charles Stratton whom he renamed General Tom Thumb and dressed in a Napoleon costume and presented to Queen

Victoria. Tom Thumb was twenty-five inches tall and could play any character Barnum required. He was the most famous person in the world for a time. When Tom Thumb died, four million people read about it in the papers. Barnum cried publicly and continued touring within the month.

Sam called him from the facility three times in the first week. The calls were short and brisk and organized — logistics, visitor hours, what to bring, what not to. She did not say she missed him. She did not say she was scared. She asked about his work, about the sketching, about whether the Caddy family had ever gotten their car running. She was the most present person he had ever spoken to on the telephone. She was entirely elsewhere.

The crowd had its formula. Breaking lamps. A doctor's office printer. Punch-soma. She asks, managing the possible walls. A flyover landing, her face going red then white, a kind little street kid in a dirty ski parka carrying something concealed. The destination was always chosen before you arrived. The route was always designed to lead you there.

Pratar om Svensk en dröm. A skiff takes passengers outside something. The harbour has a hydraulic arm. Flies over Vashon Island. A warehouse search. An outburst in the woods. A beehive overturned. Sliding down a ravine toward a creek.

Several days elapsed with no entry. A schedule of feeding and hygienic structure, adhered to rigorously. A defense against ambient noise. The following entry, written as if from outside the body looking down: a possible connected murder. The westside blueberry farm, from the promontory.

Paul Kuniholm read the early entries without comment. This was also characteristic. A producer who comments too early is a producer who is writing, not producing — who is imposing the shape of the thing before the thing has found its own shape. Paul waited. Paul let the material accumulate. Paul understood that the job was not to direct the record but to be present to it, to create the conditions under which it could become itself.

The sucker, it turns out, is born every minute not because people are stupid but because wonder is structural. We are built to be astonished. Barnum merely industrialized the architecture of awe.

Segment Three: Version of the Truth

A familiar abandonment. The power was shut off. A darkened house on 32nd West. A little from an institution's cafeteria — foam-board-loaded cups when there were games, made from cardstock. Waiting for the play to commence. A conference in the cove house to introduce the new bull, Mike 'Patriarchy.' A name like a banner hung above an entrance. A name like a claim painted on the side of a wagon.

Barnum was a showman before he was a circus man, which is to say: he understood that the show precedes the substance, that the name on the sign creates the thing named, that truth is a version and the version is a product and the product requires constant renewal lest the crowd lose interest and wander toward the next tent.

There is always a person under the bed in a Barnum story. The person under the bed is the attraction that isn't advertised — the thing the crowd didn't pay to see but will talk about for years. The Feejee Mermaid was a monkey's torso sewn to a fish's tail and it was repulsive and it was the most popular exhibit Barnum ever displayed because the crowd had paid to see a mermaid and instead saw the seam, the construction, the mechanics of the illusion, and this — not the illusion itself — was what they could not stop thinking about.

Sam had a version of the truth. It was internally consistent, which was the only standard she ever applied. He had known this from early on — had seen it in the way she described her past, the careful selection of emphasis, the incidents that got told and the incidents that didn't, the architecture of the self-presentation that was not dishonest so much as curatorial. She was her own museum. She charged admission by proximity.

What was it — you never found the book. The diary of travels. Never did find out what was real. The schools were rendering a version of the truth. She did call many times after the first leaving. She had been used. They found her wandering the railroad tracks all the way to Sacramento. That was a non-starter, given her prior addiction. She took that pretty hard. He thinks the Sacramento crew was the seed of her final initiative.

He had tried, during the good stretches, to document things accurately — dates, names, the sequence of events. But memory and the record disagreed. His notes from certain weeks were illegible, not because his handwriting was bad but because he had been writing in the dark, literally, propped up in bed with the light off so she could sleep, getting it down while it was still present, while the shape of the day was still available to him. The

handwriting degraded and what remained was approximate. He worked from approximations.

He tried to keep the fires stoked. If you care to the permanent, the intuitive reduces to vague reminiscence. Flashbacks of forever fidelity, indelibly tattooed on the mind's eye. She was unresponsive. She wasn't gone but had been built to last one long enough. She was injured. Built to the hilt. Version of the truth.

A striped yellow-red ranch shirt over her cardigan. A Vietnamese mechanic using a wide dream to fix a gas engine. There was a person under the bed. A night-terror kickboxing move. Sleep phase disturbed. An inflatable double-mode clown costume with heads on both sides of the torso. Two phones crashing because of dual authentication failure.

The medication. The injection in the shoulder intramuscularly, which changed her into a sweet, peaceful girl. One doctor with a dissenting position on that medication. He feels certain something calmed the drugs. He feels certain it hurt their dream of marriage and maybe a would-give-her-an-Invega Sustenna shot and she became calm, cooperative, placid. They were certain her way was forming. She insisted she was going to leave Seattle and make her way to California.

The man with the meth saw his opportunity. He drove her to Sacramento. She was discovered naked and delusional by law enforcement, who had her committed to the state psychiatric hospital involuntarily. Sam made her way north eventually. He picked her up from the Olympia bus station. Still called him. He drove to Union and picked her up. He brought her outside. She had the cold stare within hours. She was back out on the streets again. She met someone on the bus. She sucked his cock for a little. And that was what she overdosed on in the bathroom on the morning of 6/19/2018.

He found out by phone. A number he didn't recognize, a woman's voice, official without being unkind. The words arranged themselves in an order that he understood individually but that did not cohere into meaning for a long time, possibly days. He sat at the kitchen table with the phone still in his hand. Outside, the street was doing what streets do: cars, voices, the ordinary percussion of a city that has not been informed.

He called Paul Kuniholm. He did not know why he called Paul first — not before family, not before mutual friends, not before any of the people whose place in the hierarchy of grief would have been clearer. He called Paul because Paul answered. Because Paul's voice on the phone was the kind of voice that does not fill the silence, that holds the space open, that treats the unspeakable as something that can be sat with rather than something that must be immediately converted into language. Paul said: I'm here. That was all. It was enough.

Barnum's version of the truth was internally consistent. The version performing as the thing itself, until everyone forgot there had been another version before this one.

Version of the truth. What was it you never found. The diary of travels. The show must go on is not a statement of courage. It is a statement of structure. The moment the show stops is the moment you have to account for what the show was covering.

Segment Four: The Vibration of the Meeting

The vibration of their meeting, December 3, 2019. She was dressed in a light, somewhat sheer floral-print dress with the color red prominent. Hair Brontë-dark. He was parking his bike on 15th when she sidled into the conversation, admiring it. She gave him his first kisses since the divorce. She had seen the check on the counter. She had noted the name and address.

This was a year and a half after Sam. He was aware of the arithmetic. He was aware of the gap between the end of one thing and the beginning of another and what the gap contained — the schedule of feeding and hygienic structure, adhered to rigorously, the defense against ambient noise, the days that elapsed with no entry in the notebook. The December girl in the floral dress was not a replacement. He did not believe in the concept of replacement. He believed in the concept of subsequent, which was different: not instead of, but after, in the full and irreducible meaning of that word.

He felt the need to call his old friends. It was a foregone conclusion. An intercity telling about her tendencies. The sleepover. The cold hallway in the morning. Men's underwear waistband torn loose in back. The letters for a collaborative mural. A book of matches, the cover slim: Silver and Truant.

Sam had loved matches. Specifically the act of lighting them and then watching the flame negotiate its way down the stick toward her fingers, as close as possible before blowing it out. She did this at restaurants, at bars, anywhere there were matches or candles. She said she was trying to determine where exactly the point of no return was — the point at which the flame would reach the fingers regardless of intervention. He had watched her do this hundreds of times. He had never seen her get burned. He was not certain whether this was skill or luck or whether, with Sam, the distinction was meaningful.

A v-shaped bandstand. Rock and roll. Mark Hanna tuning up, beginning to jam, looking forward to showing simplistic guitar skills, being known as a drummer. A zip-loc full of assorted items, one of which was unrecognizable — ten-year-old wax granules, a golden color.

Setting with keen intent to read and improve and coordinate, while simultaneously manufacturing the resemblance of a book. This is the Barnum method exactly: manufacture the resemblance of the thing before the thing exists. Hang the banner. Print the tickets. The crowd will assemble and the crowd's assembly will create the demand and the demand will call the thing into being.

He was doing this with the notebook. He had been doing it since June 16th, since the construction site at Magnolia Elementary, since the greater-than symbols he could not explain. He was assembling something. He did not know what it was yet. He trusted that the assembling would clarify the thing being assembled, that the act of getting it down would eventually reveal what it was that was being gotten down. Sam would have had opinions about this. Sam had opinions about everything related to the gap between intention and execution, between the claim on the banner and what was actually in the tent.

Paul Kuniholm had opinions about this too, and they were different from Sam's, and the difference was productive. Where Sam came at the question from inside — from the interior, from the sovereign privacy of her own making — Paul came at it from outside, from the producer's position: the position of the person who sees the whole stage, who hears the whole score, who is responsible not for the vision but for the conditions under which the vision can be realized and communicated. Sam asked: what is this? Paul asked: what can this become? Both questions were necessary. He had been working, in the notebook, to hold both at once.

Using a trap. Ambakam clothed. Making about taking. Jilts a ten. As the mnemonic awareness becomes mindfulness. Numeral two seems complete. South Mediterranean orphanage. Wheeled right.

He called it his harem — meaning it could negate the care facility. Wandering. Holding hands in the manner of Juliet's carols. A golem-stone's head fell to the side when reminded of the epithet.

A cop. The apprenticed unknown. Get in the van. Perspective violations. A jet over the freeway near Easton. Samantha mistaking many trees for willows when few are truly hollow.

The hollow tree is still a tree. Barnum would have charged admission to the hollow tree. He would have hired a man to stand inside it and call it the Voice of the Ancient Forest and the crowd would have formed a line and the line would have been the point — not the tree, not the man, not the voice, but the line: the evidence of collective desire, which is the only thing Barnum ever really sold.

Segment Five: Scottsdale

To Scottsdale. Elite wealth. Apex. A cat in the closet. Every aspect of life in crisis; the limit had been reached. A song idea. Annie White. She gave small instructions. A reasonably sound sleep phase followed.

Barnum went bankrupt in 1855. He was forty-five years old. He regarded bankruptcy the way he regarded every other reversal: as material. He was solvent again within four years. He was prosperous again within six. The show did not stop. The show was what continued when everything else stopped.

He had known, before the end, that something irreversible was approaching. Not the overdose specifically — he had not predicted the date or the circumstances or the bathroom in the rooming house on the morning of 6/19/2018 — but the general direction. The vector. He had understood for some time that Sam was moving toward something and that the thing she was moving toward had a name he could not say out loud because saying it out loud would make him complicit in its naming, and he was not willing to be complicit, which may have been a form of love or may have been a failure of nerve or may have been, as Barnum would have understood, simply the refusal to read the sign.

Every aspect of life in crisis. The limit had been reached. The opulent velvet décor of the hotel bar in Scottsdale, the opera house masquerading as a resort. Inspection will continue. Antique cuttings. Suspicion.

A park setting. Two young lovers rehearsing. A set, obviously. Scene storyboarding. Cajoling. An outer conspirator. Excruciating remorse for dynamic languages, specifically the word 'No.' A text to whom he thought was Tony ended up being Lisa. An auto parts store. Two rooms. An answer to Tony's question about wanting a love interest.

Barnum's answer to bankruptcy was the lecture circuit. He traveled the country giving a talk he titled 'The Art of Money-Getting,' which told audiences primarily that the way to get money was to provide people with what they wanted. The corollary — that the wanting was itself a manufactured condition, that desire could be created and then satisfied by the same enterprise that created it — went mostly unexamined, as the most structurally important ideas usually do.

He thought about Sam in Scottsdale. He thought about her in the resort bar with the motivational bourbon menu, in the context of all the things she would have said about it. Sam was gifted at the precise deflation of pretension — not unkindly, not from superiority, but from a genuine

confusion about the apparatus of status, the scaffolding of it, the enormous effort required to maintain the impression of effortlessness. She found it exhausting on behalf of its practitioners. She felt sorry for people who needed the resort to feel like they deserved the resort.

Sam did not need things to feel like she deserved them. This was either her greatest strength or the thing that killed her. Possibly both. Possibly the same thing.

The willow when few are truly hollow. Samantha mistaking many trees for willows. A jet over the freeway near Easton. The world mistaking many things for what they are not.

Paul Kuniholm called from Scottsdale, or from somewhere. Paul called. He had a way of calling at the precise moment the material required external pressure — not to redirect it, not to correct it, but to confirm that it was still moving, that the accumulation had not stalled, that the show was still going. How's the notebook, Paul said. Still going, he said. Good, Paul said. Keep going. That was all. It was enough.

The Art of Money-Getting. The Art of Meaning-Getting. The Art of Getting Back to Something That Was Already Yours, Except It Wasn't, Except It Was, Except Barnum Already Sold It.

Segment Six: Lil King

And also defeat. The sequence was uncertain. It might as well be Lil King. Learning to work with his hands. A train in snow. Thirty-one years ago, the best person in the world made his history. Westbound approaching Tacoma. The cold law enforcement radio. Heartless communiqués. An indecipherable location of origin.

Tom Thumb was the Lil King. Charles Stratton of Bridgeport, Connecticut — five pounds at birth, normal size at six months, and then nothing, no further growth, while the world expanded around him at the ordinary rate. Barnum gave him a stage and the stage gave him sovereignty over the room, which is its own kind of height.

Sam had her own kind of sovereignty. It was not the kind that required a stage or an audience or a Barnum to manufacture and manage it. It was quieter and more durable and more alarming in its implications, because it did not depend on external conditions. She was sovereign over the interior. She had made peace, at some point he had not witnessed, with whatever lived in there, and the peace was not the peace of resolution but of coexistence — she had agreed to live alongside the thing and the thing had agreed to let her, and the terms of the agreement were not disclosed to anyone outside the arrangement.

He did not know, and would never know, when the agreement changed. When the terms were renegotiated. When the thing got the better deal.

A guide dog that would have been released. The impounded dam waters. The dog swimming as the waters cascaded. Soo Cox rag held back the reservoir. In a Rambler with Terry Lewis — an idiot's infantile tantrum of noise, disrupting his young son behind the wheel. Edo with a girl on each arm. She announced she'd just drunk juice. Cannot be confirmed nor denied.

Sriracha palpably encountered. A commonplace ferry vision, compromised by reality. Contamination fuel tank. Guang Zhen rhymes. An instructor of calculus. Her stretch skirt pulled down in back. Trying to save a seat in a crowded theater. Bowling alone.

She took off a dress made of pearls, soon joined by the dyke photographer who told her to remove the dress and hand it around her waist, to stand on the stairs one step higher, holding the bottom with both hands. The message. New address. A coffee-colored build of hair. She turned into Nozzle Zone. The irrationality of wealth.

The bar was closed. The sign said: RENOVATION. The renovation had been ongoing for four years. Through the window the bar was still intact — bottles

in the speed rail, stools squared to the counter. The Barnum condition made spatial: the apparatus of the show preserved even after the show has closed, because to dismantle it would be to admit the show is over, and Barnum never admitted the show was over, not even at his death, at which point he reportedly asked about the day's box office receipts.

He had kept Sam's number in his phone for two years after 6/19/2018. He had not called it. He had not deleted it. It sat in the contact list alphabetically, between two other people who were alive and did not know they were bracketing a ghost, and once, only once, in the third month after, he had opened the contact and stared at it for a long time and then put the phone face-down on the counter and walked out of the apartment and walked until he was too tired to think about anything except the mechanics of walking.

Paul Kuniholm understood this without being told. Paul had the producer's instinct for when to speak and when to walk alongside without speaking, when the material needed engagement and when it needed only witness. There is a version of producing that is indistinguishable from friendship: the long accompaniment, the faith in the process, the willingness to be present to something before it has earned the name of the thing it is becoming. Paul practiced this version.

What were the receipts. What is still being counted in the closed bar, behind the renovation sign, in the dark.

Segment Seven: The Librarian at the Table

Omniscience is retrieving an old flip phone left near a quiet rural home, crawling feet first under an old white truck. Once out from underneath, someone had started the truck and was pulling it a different way. The front fenders flopped from rusty underpinnings. Quickly to the living room where two elderly women and a spinster were settling in for the evening. On the coffee table: two uninteresting items on top of a Swedish-language textbook. The sister was studying Svenska.

Barnum's American Museum on Broadway contained, at various points: a flea circus, a glass-blowing studio, a knitting machine, an albino family, a pair of beluga whales, a grizzly bear, a tattooed man, a model of Niagara Falls, the skeleton of a whale, a 161-year-old woman who was not 161. Admission: twenty-five cents. It was the most visited building in America for thirty years. He called it a museum because the word museum implied education, which implied legitimacy, which implied that the twenty-five cents was an investment in self-improvement.

Sam would have loved the American Museum. She had a weakness for the genuinely strange that was distinct from a taste for the ironic — she did not love things because they were bad or because loving them signaled something about her own discernment; she loved them because they were strange, which seemed to her a sufficient reason to love anything. She would have stood in front of the Feejee Mermaid for a long time. She would not have been troubled by the seam. She would have thought the seam was the best part.

As the bibliotek closed for the day, the librarian brought to the table where three patrons sat a very large PPE mask — one by two — with which she instructed them to wipe down the tabletop. Instructions were given for the wording of the oration. As an emphasis, an image slightly larger than life-size was thrown upon the hums of the orator: a circular, cartoonish head in yellow. Lawrence Junior's gold Camaro. A little ways.

At J&M Historic, VE Day. Steve Freeborn mixing drinks. An atomizer misting lemon-scented vapor. Recognition of commerce. A non-alcoholic drink should be purchased. A club soda. In the ledger, instead one paid five dollars.

He had told the December girl about Sam. Not on the first night, not on the second, but on the third, when the conversation had reached the latitude where withholding the information would have been a form of deception. The December girl had listened. She had not said the things people usually say — she had not produced the sympathy that is indistinguishable from a desire to conclude the topic. She had asked two questions. The questions were

specific and useful and he had not been able to answer either of them, which was the most useful thing she could have done.

A shaggy Staffordshire Terrier named Roy, not particularly obedient, dominated by prey drive. The west lawn of Tilden House. Watching first up close: Asian tourists packing a white Audi, then near the front of the store, the driver very inexperienced and slowly running over one of them.

The librarian instructs those to wipe down the tabletop. This is the opposite of Barnum. Barnum was in the business of accumulation — stacking exhibit upon exhibit, claim upon claim, until the sheer volume of assertion became its own form of credibility. The librarian was in the business of the clean surface. The wiped table. The condition of having removed what was there before so that something true might have room to settle.

Paul Kuniholm was somewhere between Barnum and the librarian, which is where a good producer lives: in the accumulation and then in the wiping clean, taking in everything and then identifying what belongs on the table. When Paul finally read the full notebook — all of it, the whole record from June 16th forward — he said: this is a book. He said it without ceremony, as a simple statement of the clean surface. This is a book. Now make it one.

Sam was a reader. Not a collector of reading — not the kind of person whose shelves were a performance of intellectual identity — but a reader in the deep, quiet, private sense. She read the way she did everything privately: with her full attention and no audience. He had found her once, in his apartment, sitting in the kitchen at two in the morning with a book open on the table, a cup of cold tea beside it, so absorbed that she had not heard him come in. He had stood in the doorway for a while before saying her name. She had looked up with the expression of someone returning from a significant distance.

Barnum and the librarian are at opposite ends of the same impulse — the need to organize what is known, to make the shapeless take a shape. The claim is always the exhibit. The exhibit is always the claim. And Sam was always the thing in the room that both versions failed to account for.

Segment Eight: The Plank

From nursing school, with honors. Then she marched down to the bridge and threw herself into the big blue sea. Two kinds of stepladder. The patchwork construction. A small dimensional-size furl ring strip, most punctured, crossed the Bardo state. Demolisher of yanking the plank.

Barnum's first museum burned to the ground in 1865. The animals that could be saved were saved. The animals that could not were not. The crowd that gathered to watch the museum burn was, by all accounts, enormous. Barnum was not present. He received word by telegram and wrote back: TERRIBLE. OPENING NEW MUSEUM NEXT YEAR.

He did not have a telegram. He had a phone that rang and a voice that arranged words in a familiar order and a kitchen table and the ordinary street outside continuing to be ordinary. He did not write back. There was nothing to write back to. There was no one to whom he could say: TERRIBLE. OPENING NEW SOMETHING NEXT YEAR. The next thing was not yet imaginable and would not be, for a long time.

Paul Kuniholm had said: keep the notebook going. This was three weeks after 6/19/2018. Paul had said it without making it a directive — had said it the way a good producer says the things that are actually instructions: as an observation, as a statement of what is already true, as a description of what the person is already doing whether they know it or not. The notebook is still going, Paul had said. Yes, he had said. I know, Paul had said.

The nights immediately after were the worst because sleep was the failure condition — sleep was where Sam appeared not as a loss but as a presence, as entirely herself, in dreams so mundanely accurate that waking from them was a second notification. He would surface from the dream with the specific texture of her still available to him, the weight of her absence arriving again as impact rather than ache, and he would lie in the recalibrating dark and wait for the information to settle into something his waking mind could carry.

In the multiple house, he messed himself, shat everywhere. The cool intellectual was cooking shepherd's pie and a right-sized steak. Later that night, driving in hill convoy style into a vast driveway. On the other side: a block and tackle. The frieze of a canal house. A hotel-wall open invitation.

Small tchotchkes. Lifting and moving a goat. How Dylan was published abroad. Finally, the instant before a suggestion was eliminating: a copy of a magazine in the lifter's cord. The narrator's possession. Dylan was scared this was a person, a lifelong friend, a piece that would expose him. But to his

relief, none of the end words. A bundle removed from the tor. The magazine relinquished onto Zimmerman.

Harmonizing. A Rambler yard site. Contracting a plague on a Greyhound bus. Punches in shoulder, not hurt bad. Mustangs. Models. Dionysian. Reunited following the separation in the farmhouse. Cousin. Looking down from a height of twenty feet at the sea of the tops of people's heads.

He had gone, in the first months, to the places they had been together. Not out of sentimentality exactly — not to feel closer to her, since she was not there to be close to — but out of a need to confirm that the places still existed, that the city had not revised itself in her absence, that the reading where they had met still smelled like bad wine and unfinished work, that the bar on the corner where she had demonstrated her match trick still had candles on the tables, that the kitchen table was still a kitchen table and not yet a memorial.

Commence. Passion overwhelms both photo and narrator. Earwax puddle on an airport parking lot. A snub-nose revolver with a silencer. A crack in the little blue guitar.

The plank is the thing you walk. The plank ends at the edge of the ship, which ends at the edge of the water, which extends to a horizon that is not an ending but a limit of vision. Barnum walked plank after plank and at the end of each plank simply built another ship. He did not know yet whether he was Barnum in this story or whether he was the crowd watching Barnum — whether he was the one selling the vision of continuation or the one who had paid for the ticket.

The show must go on is not a statement of courage. It is a statement of structure. The show must go on because the show is all there is. The moment the show stops is the moment you have to account for what the show was covering.

Segment Nine: Non Sitter

Non sitter, och kysser mig, bene. Physically unfit. Lashing out against a question he hadn't been asked. The surveyor utters a family name. Having recorded the theft of a swirled-under blade. Fat face. No cocoa. Over six feet tall. More than three hundred pounds. The cuckolded one. Tub of tartar on chin. Narco visit. By Rouen. Head-on Harley. Their own house. Baptists crawling in a spiral lift. Five dollar doobies. Did you ever remark.

Barnum was six foot two and weighed, in his later years, something approaching two hundred and fifty pounds. He had a large head, a large voice, a large appetite for food and spectacle and company and argument and self-promotion. He understood that the exhibitor must himself be an exhibit — that the crowd needs a face to attach to the enterprise, a body that embodies the audacity of the claim.

The grief had a body too. It occupied space in a way he had not expected — not the diffuse atmospheric grief of lesser losses but something with mass, with presence, with the disconcerting ability to be in two places at once. He would be at the grocery store and the grief would be at the grocery store. He would be at a reading and the grief would be at the reading. It was not morbid, exactly. It was more like having a companion who did not speak but who was reliably present and whose presence he had, over time, stopped trying to explain to people who asked why he seemed distracted.

He was not distracted. He was attended.

Outgoing phone messages. Cryptocurrency. Long list. The word passport. Camping. Far girls' mints. Disagreeing on the amount of completion. I'll just walk home. Buffet. No napkins. Misplaced TV pilot. Trunk. Wallet not remote. Meth spoon. Ryan smokes cigar. Won't listen. War ensues. Too much eye makeup. Red file. Spaghetti. Label: Fuck This.

Berrie Ann Knaus demonstrated a hat like the appropriation of a pot lid, held her forearm across the torso vertically. The consummation was soon to take place. A gas studio in the new old place, showing the whole site. A high staircase fashioned from concrete form protrusions. A video game Trac-Ball where a steering wheel goes normally. The road along the water going out.

Issues with the second in command. Allaying fears with a lady. Downtown. All in the hooker's house. Forgot trying. No way out. Forklift. Mom falls over a railing. Talking. Calling. Coffee shop. Big museum space. Laughter. Arms. Belly laugh. Minor crash. Art space. Real.

The gnome on Rainier Avenue had been turned to face the wall. On the back of its head, someone had written in permanent marker, in very small letters: BARNUM'S GNOME. DO NOT EXHIBIT.

He photographed it and sent the photograph to Paul Kuniholm with no message. Paul wrote back within minutes: that's the title. He had not been thinking about titles. He had not been thinking about the notebook as something with a title, or as something at all beyond the private accumulation it had always been. But Paul Kuniholm was always ahead of the material in exactly this way — not ahead in the sense of knowing what it would become, but ahead in the sense of already treating it as what it was going to become, already producing the future version of the thing while the present version was still finding its shape. This was what a producer did. This was what Paul did. The notebook became Bar Gnome the moment Paul named it. The name was always already there, on the back of the gnome, in permanent marker, waiting for someone to photograph it and send it to the right person.

He stood at the bar and thought about what it meant to be the thing Barnum would not exhibit. Barnum exhibited everything: the beautiful, the grotesque, the miraculous, the fraudulent, the ambiguous, the embarrassing. What was the exhibit that even Barnum would quietly turn to face the wall? He thought it was the exhibit that, if displayed, would empty the tent — not because it was too terrible but because it was too true. The thing so precisely, accurately, unperformably real that no amount of framing or naming or admission-charging could convert it into spectacle. Sam, at two in the morning in the kitchen with the cold tea and the book. Sam at the door of the facility with the bag packed. Sam on the phone from the facility, asking about the Caddy family, asking about the sketching.

The bartender poured him a drink he hadn't ordered, said it was on the house, and walked to the other end of the bar.

Ask of loose tobacco. Driving car. Coming down a vest. Greyhound bus depot. Calls by name for attribution. Reality reverie. The exhibit that even Barnum would not exhibit.

Segment Ten: The Tree

A 1963 GMC white V6, and a tree. The tranny pops out of gear. Tree mashes the front clip from the passenger vantage. But when the closer look: a straight body. The voice warned: involuntary infanticide. The consequences became. Logging. Decide how. The break-in through the sink.

Warming up for a bagpipe. Luca ranked fourteenth. Grandma. Lipstick Lez. Flying in a helicopter. Release from crane. Boom follows. Disbelief. Buying fizzy water. Transmitting to floor. Beige knob berry. Chinaton. Infatuations. A button interferes. Lucas. Captains the ship. A hatch holds firm. Pedaling pill. Falleas milk. How to lock doors.

Barnum's partner was James A. Bailey. Bailey was the organizational mind to Barnum's visionary mouth — the man who built the infrastructure of the circus while Barnum built the legend of it. The circus was called Barnum & Bailey's, which placed Barnum's name first despite Bailey being in many operational respects the primary architect of what the audience actually experienced.

Sam had said once, during one of the good stretches, that she thought the problem with grief — other people's grief for her, she meant, prospectively, with the calm accuracy she brought to all the hard conversations — was that it tended to resolve the person. To finish them. To take the ongoing, unresolved, contradictory, still-becoming thing that a person was and convert it, posthumously, into a fixed exhibit. She would become, she said, a version. A curated selection. The best stories in the right order with the difficult parts edited for the comfort of the audience.

He had said he wouldn't do that. She had smiled at him with the match-trick expression — testing the point of no return, watching the flame negotiate the distance.

He was trying not to do that. The notebook was an attempt not to do that. The jagged, illegible, approximate, fragmented accumulation of it — the greater-than symbols and the Caddy family and the Strawberry Festival and the wrong-way bike path and the things he couldn't read back afterward — was an attempt to resist the curatorial impulse, to keep the record unresolved, to refuse the fixed exhibit.

A number of abandoned kit drums, including pedals. Space during a people's sports arena. The raft of picnic tables. Trying to prove the space was legitimating. Rushed downstream. Snow in Ballard. Winning. Showing at Gooder. Birthday party. Buns at a convention. Not my rodeo. Costume. Greyhound terminal.

By putting them on their spines. No neurological tourism. Sound produced with love can cancel noise. No one is adversary. Sound is a friend. Swedish drone. Cat vacuum. Planting boxes. Consummate all murals by hand. Helpful driver. Handful of rock at the fray. Trees strewn. Steam industry. Fremont power lights off. An aspen. Child's earflap hat. Ground score.

Lil King's queen was a lead foot. Took a backseat to the Yesler Terrace community center. The superstar had succumbed to a dope habit. Sudden acceleration. A rapid fling. The cat was injured but survived. Horse stall scream. Kicking every night. Electric bike generator.

The bar called Bar Gnome — Barnum, the near-homophone, the compression, the small American joke about spectacle and the con — was in Fremont. It had been there for thirty years under that name. He had been walking past it his entire adult life. He had never gone in because he had always assumed it referred to a garden ornament, the kind of ironic décor that Fremont specialized in. The neighborhood's long-running project of making everything slightly more itself than it needed to be.

He pushed open the door. He went in.

The bar was long and dark and smelled like every bar that had ever preceded it. Behind the register, on a shelf that had clearly been installed for this specific purpose: a gnome. The original. Ceramic, chipped, red cap, maybe four inches. Its expression was the one he now recognized — not a sneer, not a smile, but the face of something that has been watching long enough to have an opinion about what it sees and has decided, for reasons of its own, to keep that opinion entirely to itself.

Sam would have liked this bar. Sam would have been here before him. Sam would have been on a first-name basis with the gnome.

The sucker, it turns out, is you. The sucker is me. The sucker is the entire audience of the longest-running show in American history, which is not a circus but the idea of one — the idea that there is always more, always something greater around the next corner, always a tent you haven't entered, always a banner that, if you just follow it far enough, will lead you to something worth the price of admission.

Segment Eleven: Insubstantial Esotericism

Insubstantial esotericism. Fell. An as-of-now. At the gate. Rain fell. A quiet patriarch. Luca gets a brunette supermodel. A toilet clogged with lemons. A table asks to hold on the menu. Booking. A rockery. Bus kids. Unloading. Custodian. More work. Focus less. Philanthropy. Adjustments. Bubbles. Angle of repose. Tubular flatcar halo. Train cop. A copper disk, six inches in diameter.

Shaw gyrations. Code request for Beta blocker. Some kind of coin. Bragging. Going past Ruthie. Driving the Renault north in the spirit. Limo son scratching. He knew old. In swapping spit. Nova bought for nothing, after collision. Rick. A Toscano print. Every war. The chalk. Naome is in the whole.

Drunk comments. Sean animal. Met two kinds of coffee filters. Crow decrackers. Misogyny. Junkies. Snow steals the discount. School lunch line. Pasta. When do native kids sell lightning? A hurry. Valiant with knocking. Connecting rod. Ammo boy. Cubes. Long-footed Asian woman. Puts her cheeks. Lean back. Boat bus slumber.

A vague premise of water. The mocha-colored girl appreciates a caress of her hip. Chihuahua staircase. Sacred circus — and this is the phrase that unlocks the segment, that reveals its argument to itself: sacred circus. The thing that is both holy and absurd. The thing that requires belief and generates wonder and is, on close inspection, a monkey sewn to a fish. The thing that is nonetheless true in the way that only performed things can be true — not despite the performance but through it.

Sam was a sacred circus. He had thought this for years without the words for it, and now he had the words, in this bar, on this night. The thing that required belief and generated wonder. The thing that, on close inspection, showed the seam. The thing that was nonetheless true — not despite the seam but because of it, through it, in the precise and mortal gap between the monkey and the fish.

Running out. Red Pontiac. My mentor did not attend. A scale model of my apartment, modified. African renter enquires about a vacant one. A schooner with masts cut down. A personal bus. Kids. Unloading.

Olga. Andelva model. Xavier studio visit. Snack bar. Sanding. Suggest a warehouse exhibition. Bardo-hatch.

He sat at the end of the bar nearest the original gnome. Around him the bar filled and emptied and filled again. People told their stories to each other and to themselves and into their phones and into the general ambient noise of eleven o'clock on a weeknight in a Fremont bar in the twenty-first century,

which was full of people who had been born into the long aftermath of the Barnum era and were still, despite everything, trying to find the exhibit, still following the banner, still standing in the line that led to the tent.

He thought about what it meant that Sam had died before he found the bar. Whether she would have come here with him. Whether they would have sat at this end of the bar and he would have told her his theory about Barnum and she would have said something that reframed it entirely, something he had not considered, something that arrived from the angle she always arrived from — oblique, precise, arriving from outside the frame of the question.

He opened his notebook. He wrote: Bar Gnome. Barnum. The near-homophone. The American joke at the American scale. The con that is also the wonder. The wonder that requires the con. The crowd that will always follow the sign. The sign that always says: this way, this way, something this way. And underneath that, in smaller letters, in the handwriting that degraded in the dark: Sam. All of it is about Sam. All of it was always about Sam.

He texted Paul Kuniholm: I think I know what it is now. Paul texted back, three seconds later: I know. He had been waiting.

Hatch. Chairished. Bob Welch. Kiss. The ice melting. A copper disk, six inches in diameter. The bibliotek closes. The librarian wipes the table. The three patrons remain seated. Nothing spilled. You understand more. Another in a row.

Segment Twelve: The Ra Dome

NSA explanation, seeing through the Ra dome golf ball. Big wheel drift. Zoom call clarified. Elliott Ave. Pat's hot tub. Lineage to Ghen. A ventriloquist-size patriarch jumps to his name. Cat. Shapiro. It arrived. Dirty shirt. Interfering with bronze scull. Johnny Cash junk museum. Girl with an apron wrapped around her head. County bus. Racing Garfield. Grey eyebrows.

Jeni berates in bed, explaining who he is by name. Don't force mother to drive. Nice vision. Drives fast on Vashon. Tea on lap in car. Cat claws. Voyeur. Warhol. Corolla. Narrow hips and waist in white. Open the in door. Submerge phone. Nemesis. Unknownist. Brand. Limb severed bough. Artist. Ferns. Like flesh. Spare car. Red VW Bug. Nick count. Swift aero to home. Snookie is the name. Nicked. Chairs. Bus commandeered. Lake City. Ernest hummingbird. Bagged cameras eaten. Unusual grocery store transaction. Ankle fangs. Venomous spider. Singer dye. Hard brick. Fleece couple.

Dreaming. The Fed ringleader made a peace clip ring. Clenched in embrace with Anna Saliva. Doodled on her face. Jagger sign. Aged. Bed when visiting. Pass pod. Love notes. Bosompal embroidery. Poster. Entrance. Island Theatre. Listening. You understand more. Another in a row.

Thirty-foot-long 1963 Pontiac white station wagon with accents of neon tubing. Light. Mixing board. Kitchen sink. Coated wire pulled from the intestines. Also rubber tube. Hot train. Mountain elevator. Rocket. Family. Strong handles. Debrief client. Made eye contact and assumed a professional one. Introducing to the two silent tenants: my task is repairing the receptacle on the floor. And the three of them departed. The feline liberated by pretentious curry. Dusty punks in a bike shop. Bike stolen. Conjoining to sleep.

She turned into Nozzle Zone. The irrationality of wealth. A stageroom directing laughter toward hate. Discovering the drab mailbox was not secured. Many defensive faces resulted in a sore town. Squeezing a few fingers. Corrals.

He returned to Bar Gnome on the last night. After midnight, the crowd thinned to the serious few — the ones who stay not because they have nowhere to go but because here, specifically, is where they have chosen to be. He took his seat at the end of the bar. He placed his notebook on the counter. Twelve segments. Every observation documented. The construction site in Magnolia on June 16th. The crowd that pushed you out onto the veranda. Sam in the old waiting room with the short blonde hair, curled tight. Sam at the door of the facility with the bag already packed. Sam on the phone asking about the Caddy family. Sam in the kitchen at two in the

morning with the cold tea and the book and the great distance. Sam on 6/19/2018.

The December meeting, the floral dress, the red. Scottsdale and the cat in the closet. The closed Reservoir through the dirty glass. The librarian wiping the table with a very large mask. The Greyhound bus and the magazine and the lid. Rainier Ave and the gnome that faced the wall. The gnome on whose back someone had written: BARNUM'S GNOME. DO NOT EXHIBIT.

He sat with all of it. He sat with the accumulated wreckage and beauty of it. The things that had happened and the things he had written down and the things the handwriting had obscured and the things he had recovered and the things that were gone. He sat with Sam. Not with the memorial version, not with the curated selection, not with the best stories in the right order with the difficult parts softened for the comfort of the audience — but with Sam as she had been: oblique, precise, sovereign over the interior, arriving always from outside the frame of the question, demonstrating the match trick again and again and never getting burned, or getting burned and not showing it, or burning clean through and calling it by a different name.

Barnum died in 1891. He was eighty years old. His last known words were reportedly a question about the day's ticket sales. The New York Times ran his obituary on the front page. The headline read: GREAT SHOWMAN DEAD. The subheading read: A LIFE DEVOTED TO AMUSING THE PUBLIC. The public, for its part, had already bought tickets to the next show. The next show was already running. The next show had been running since before Barnum was born and would run long after the last tent was taken down.

Sam died at thirty-four. There was no headline. There was a phone call and a kitchen table and an ordinary street. There was a number in a contact list, alphabetical, bracketed by the living. There was the notebook he had been keeping since June 16th, in which she appeared first as someone he was chasing and then as someone he was losing and then as someone he was sitting with, at this bar, at this end of the bar, at this hour, in the only way available to him now, which was also available to Barnum, which was available to everyone who had ever paid the price of admission and come out the other side through the egress, blinking in the sunlight:

The way of the record. The way of the getting-it-down. The way of the notebook kept in the dark, the handwriting degrading toward the illegible, the approximation of the thing standing in for the thing, the claim on the banner pointing toward the tent, the tent containing what it contains, the crowd assembled, the crowd always assembled.

He closed the notebook. He did not look at the gnome directly. He had learned, over twelve segments and four years and every bar where the small ceramic figure appeared on its shelf, that looking directly at it was not the point. The gnome operated in peripheral vision, in the corner of the eye, in

the part of the mind that processes what the front of the brain refuses to hold: the cost of wonder, the price of the ticket, the long American joke about what we follow and why, and who built the banner, and who it was for.

Paul Kuniholm was not in the bar that night. Paul was wherever Paul was — producing, accumulating, wiping the table, treating the future version of the thing as already present. But Paul's name was in the notebook, had been in the notebook since the beginning, which meant Paul was in the book, which meant Paul was here, which meant the book was already doing what Paul had understood it would do: holding everyone who had contributed to it inside it, permanently, in the record, in the getting-it-down.

He put on his jacket. He stood at the door for a moment.

Behind him, on the shelf, the original gnome sat in the dark of the closing bar and watched everything and said nothing and remembered it all. It remembered Sam. It remembered the way the match flame negotiated the distance. It remembered the point of no return.

— END —

This way. This way. Something this way.